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When Work and Meaning Part Ways

Jonathan Malesic

Morning Lift (detail), 2018, by Peter Ravn; courtesy of the artist.

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The American work ethic is built on a promise: Work hard, and you'll earn more than just money. You'll earn social dignity, moral character, even spiritual purpose. In short, you'll live the good life. For centuries, Americans have believed that work is indispensable to human flourishing. It's been a useful belief. In absolute terms, American society is rich: American companies dominate their industries. American workers are productive.

There are only two problems with the work ethic today: Work doesn't reliably deliver the social, moral, and spiritual goods it promises, and artificial intelligence is about to render the work ethic moot. Its central promise is like rickety scaffolding that doesn't reach high enough. People fall off of it all the time as they climb in pursuit of the prize supposedly awaiting them at the top. At the same time, the whole structure stands over an unstable geological fault; sooner or later, a quake will reduce it to matchwood. Even so, we insist that the structure is sound. Anyone who gets off is deemed lazy and earns derision.

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The very meaning of work is in jeopardy right now, and a big reason is that we expect too much meaning from work. We believe the false promise that work confers dignity, character, and purpose, and we inculcate that belief in our children and students. But in the present stage of American capitalism, working means having a *job*. It means having an employer who puts our time, sweat, and (one hopes) talent to use in accordance with current managerial doctrines and for the sake of profit. So what we say about work—at the dinner table, at graduations, in opinion columns, in sermons, on the floor of the Senate—doesn't match the reality of the work we do. This mismatch leads us to a sad, profound irony: Our commitment to the work ethic, meant to help us live the good life, is actually keeping us from doing so. It will take an effort engaging our entire society to replace the cultural mythology that created this problem, before the profit motive leads companies to do away with human labor altogether. Our first step in this effort must be to understand how each component of the promise fails us.

Makers and Takers

Soon after Captain John Smith took command of the diseased and dying Jamestown settlement in 1608, he issued a decree that would lodge in the American mind for the next four centuries: "He that gathereth not every day as much as I do, the next day shall be set beyond the river, and be banished from the Fort as a drone, until he amend his conditions or starve."[1]

Smith's pronouncement excluded any middle ground between workers and worthless people, or the deserving and the undeserving, or members of society and rightful outcasts. The distinction remains with us in the contrast between "makers" and "takers." It's built into the ideal of "full employment," valorized equally on the left and right.[2] It's the basis for arguments that Medicaid and food stamp recipients should be required to work, and it grounds proposals for a universal job guarantee. Smith's threat, borrowed from Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians ("Anyone unwilling to work should not eat," 2 Thess. 3:10), is the flipside of the promise of the American work ideology: Having a job is the sole pathway to dignity, which the sociologist Allison Pugh defines as "our capacity to stand as fully recognized participants in our social world."[3] If you have a job, others acknowledge you as a contributor to society and thus as someone with a say in how it operates and a right to claim its benefits. In short, work is how you earn the right to *count* in American society.

Given that just under half of the country's total population is in the civilian labor force, many Americans' dignity is in question.[4] To shore up the nonemployed majority's claim to social citizenship, we describe parenthood and schooling in terms of work. We call these activities "jobs" not simply because they're difficult, but because we lack a vocabulary to talk about meritorious noneconomic activity. A friend of mine reports receiving a letter from his first grader's school that stated, "It is important that we start on time. We are training our children for the work force."[5] Another friend tells me that her kindergartner's teachers lead the kids in a call-and-response chant every day at lunchtime: "Hard work…pays off!"

Retirees get past the social checkpoint because they're resting after decades of hard work. They've put in their time. People whose illnesses or disabilities keep them from working get, at best, a grudging pass. They're exempt from the social requirement to work and can legitimately accept meager public benefits (even John Smith made an exception for the seriously ill), but they often have to endure skepticism about their condition. They are always under the suspicion that they're faking their disability. *He sure looks like he can work* says the strangely envious person of the neighbor who bears an invisible disability or suffers inescapable pain.

The other big exception to the working/worthless binary is owners of capital, who make money passively, through other people's labor. They're even better than workers; they're "job creators." With their godlike power, they make it possible for others to enjoy the social esteem of work and avoid the shame of unemployment.

Work may be how you count in American society, but in taking a job, you submit to a social arrangement in which you don't count. Workers are subject to what the philosopher Elizabeth Anderson calls "private government," the relatively unaccountable power bosses exert over workers' bodies, time, and behavior as a condition of employment.[6] Not only do you have little say in how your company runs, but the public and abstract dignity of employment can come at the cost of enduring more immediate, bodily indignities on the job. You can claim social citizenship if you have a job at a slaughterhouse, but you may have to give up the right to go to the bathroom during your shift. Employers sanction workers' social media postings, political activity, and recreational drug use. In Texas, where I live, and in twenty-seven other states, employers can fire workers for being LGBT, which means in effect that an employee actually *can't* participate in public life as the person she is. And countless women suffer sexual harassment on the job—whether from superiors, colleagues, or customers—often with no real recourse. Finally, if social citizenship depends on employment, then your dignity is always as precarious as your job. You count, in the society beyond your workplace, for only as long as your employer's reading of market forces permits.

"We Are What We Repeatedly Do"

A staple of parental wisdom is that work builds character. By mowing lawns, babysitting, or running a fast-food register, the story goes, shiftless children become upright adults. If a teenager can just put her phone away long enough to apply for minimum-wage work, she'll learn punctuality, responsibility, and grit—all essential traits for leading a moral life.

But like the American belief that work confers dignity on the worker, the belief that it builds character contains a deep and damaging paradox: The very process that's supposed to build character in fact often undermines it, doing considerable moral harm to workers who are also family members, friends, and citizens.

Any action we perform over and over changes us. We develop habits, and our collected habits, good and bad, make up our character. "We are what we repeatedly do," Will Durant wrote, summarizing Aristotle's moral philosophy. "Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."[7] In this view, the good life is about developing virtues like courage and temperance. No one is born with virtues. We need practice to acquire them. By the same logic, though, repeating bad actions gradually cements vicious habits that make us morally bad. Cowardice, rashness, and gluttony also develop through repeated practice. To see if work really builds character, then, we need to ask: What do we repeatedly do at work?

In the industrial era, repeating a few physical actions during a shift was the key to productivity. In the first chapter of his 1776 treatise *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith marvels at the division of labor in a pin factory. He writes that someone who had to perform every step of the pin-making process himself would struggle to make a few pins a day. Put him on a team of ten, though, and assign him only to sharpen the point of every pin that comes down the line, and he can contribute to the manufacture of thousands.[8]

But who do you become if you sharpen pinpoints all day long? Do you advance in virtue? Do you attain moral excellence? Smith didn't think so. He admired the pin factory's efficiency, but he worried that someone "whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are always the same, or very nearly the same," will build up the skills needed to perform those actions but lose the abilities that make a good citizen. Industrial productivity seemed to come at the cost of workers' "intellectual, social, and martial virtues."[9]

Work in the twenty-first-century service economy functions along the same lines as it did in the pin factory. Many office workers repeatedly perform a narrow range of mental, physical, and emotional actions on the job, and when they're done for the day, they may change out of a work suit, but they can't change out of their work self. For example, workers in the Philippines who

monitor social media for objectionable content say they get desensitized to violence, become paranoid, and develop distorted sex drives from watching beheading videos and pornography so that unwitting YouTube users won't have to.[10] Workers get morally conditioned in subtler ways, too. In her classic study of female workers' emotional labor, *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Russell Hochschild found that female flight attendants could not turn off the deferential attitude and winning smile their employers and passengers expected as part of their performance. They were just as peppy, eager to please, and sweetly self-abnegating at home as they were in the air. They repeated the script of subordinate femininity until they internalized it.[11]

Some business cultures actively reward backbiting and discourage the empathy many of us would say is at the heart of good moral character. At Amazon's headquarters in Seattle, workers are subject to periodic high-stakes performance reviews that rank them in relation to each other; the bottom tier is then dismissed. The incentive is not just to work hard but to see coworkers as rivals and make them look bad. Amazon employees told the *New York Times* that they "learn to diplomatically throw someone under the bus" or "drown someone in the deep end of the pool" to preserve their own future at the company. Managers tell subordinates who get cancer or take time off to care for a sick relative that they're a "problem" and need to shape up. Those who absorb the company's ethos proudly call themselves "Amabots." To the rest of Seattle, they're "Amholes."[12]

The Noble Lie

In a 1985 interview, twenty-nine-year-old Apple cofounder Steve Jobs said his company needed to grow fast, but not because of "the dollar goal, which is meaningless to us." Apple, he explained, had a higher purpose:

> At Apple, people are putting in 18-hour days. We attract a different type of person.… Someone who really wants to get in a little over his head and make a little dent in the universe.… Neither you nor I made the clothes we wear; we don't make the food or grow the foods we eat; we use a language that was

> developed by other people; we use another society's mathematics. Very rarely do we get a chance to put something back into that pool. I think we have that opportunity now. And no, we don't know where it will lead. We just know there's something much bigger than any of us here.[13]

50%

Of course, Apple eventually far surpassed the modest market value goal Jobs set for it in 1985. In 2011, shortly before his death, it became the most valuable publicly traded company in the world. But that's "meaningless."

Jobs's secular language of self-transcendence resonates with ancient and modern arguments that justify work on spiritual grounds. In the model city of Plato's *Republic*, justice entailed each person doing his job, and only his job. To reinforce the socioeconomic immobility this model demanded, the philosophers of the city would circulate a "noble lie," the doctrine that the gods implanted metals in the souls of the people; those with gold and silver in their souls were made to be leaders and guardians, while those endowed with baser metals were preordained for common labor.[14] The Bible's first pages are filled with language that lends significance to human work. God creates human beings to tend the garden. When they disobey him, he divides labor between the sexes and condemns them to a life of difficult toil. And in the Protestant Reformation, John Calvin and Martin Luther developed the modern concept of vocation to explain how one's work as a farmer or merchant was implicated in God's providential design for human society. Today, the language of "purpose"—or "love," the fulfillment of desire—signals that work is about more than the mundane need for a paycheck or health insurance. It means that work is about, vaguely, more.

The transformation of work into a spiritual enterprise, the site of our highest aspirations—to transcend ourselves, to encounter a higher reality, to serve others—is the work ethic's cruelest unfulfilled promise. Like the idea that work earns one dignity and character, belief in work's higher purpose trains people to accept lower salaries and worse conditions in their jobs, convinced that spiritual satisfaction is a fair substitute. That on its own isn't inherently cruel. There is, indeed, more to life than money. We should applaud and not weep for the talented attorney who chooses public service over a career in corporate tax law. She's responding to a noble calling.

But the language of self-fulfillment even appears in rhetoric around low-pay, low-status work. "Vocation" remains a common catchall term for work in Christian circles, sacralizing every position in the business hierarchy. The Wegmans grocery store chain has used the phrase "Do What You Love" in ads inviting applications for work stocking shelves and ringing up groceries. (Miya Tokumitsu rightly criticizes the imperative to love our jobs in her book, *Do What You Love and Other Lies About Success and Happiness*.)[15] This high-flown language coexists with a sense in office culture that we aren't really *doing* anything. We aren't making a dent in the universe parked in front of our laptops at our fourth strategy meeting of the day. We aren't sure the universe—or even our customers—would notice if our jobs ceased to exist. We have what David Graeber calls "bullshit jobs."[16]

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Meanwhile, people whose work has undeniable social value—nurses, physicians, teachers—burn out at alarming rates.[17] Their love turns to hatred. Their pursuit of purpose leads to spiritual barrenness. In a tragic irony, they go beyond themselves, but they end up feeling useless and unfulfilled.[18]

No More Coups to Count

There are some who attain dignity, grow in character, and find purpose in their jobs. But their numbers are not enough for the promise of the work ethic to be anything more than a myth that keeps people working.

So what should we do? Repair the whole rickety heap of our work ideology? Redesign work so that it delivers the dignity, character, and purpose it's supposed to? Pass laws that limit employers' control over workers' bodies and public behavior? Push for transparency regarding the actions workers perform, and establish norms that they specialize less narrowly and have rotating duties? Set humane limits on service work and eliminate the pointless tasks most professionals do during the workday? It wouldn't hurt to try. These are all worthy short-term goals that would help work in America live up to its promise. But making these changes would likely either reduce productivity or increase costs, leading companies to accelerate the rollout of machine labor in every aspect of their business. The changes would be self-defeating. Eventually, there would hardly be any jobs at all.

A jobless future is not necessarily a bad thing. In an important respect, the robot revolution at work would solve all the problems with work's failure to deliver on the work ethic's promise. In so many industries, the tendency is toward the ideal worker becoming more and more like a machine. Machines have no need for autonomy or privacy. They have no dignity. They don't belong to a society and thus cannot be alienated from one. They have no moral character to be distorted and can repeat a limited set of actions forever. They don't yearn for transcendence and don't worry if they're meeting genuine social needs. And, most appealing of all to businesses, they don't expect a salary. There's a decent chance that machines will be able to replicate every human task by the time today's college students turn sixty-five.[19] It's true that we might not actually put machines to work everywhere across the economy, but we do need to acknowledge that all the economic pressure is pushing in that direction. Work as we know it is going to disappear.

The fact is, work as we know it isn't worth saving anyway. There's no golden age of work, no point when it reliably fulfilled the expectations we now have for it. Maybe that's because work isn't inherently very good. Maybe we should just let the robots have it and figure out a way to distribute the fruits of their labor (admittedly, no small task).

But we Americans have built so much of our apparatus of meaning-delivery on the premise that work *is* good. Our work subjects us to corporate tyranny—yet 80 percent of us say we're "hardworking" and not lazy.[20] Our work warps us and burns us out—yet we report the highest employee engagement in the wealthy, industrialized world.[21] There is intense cultural pressure to *say* you find your work fulfilling, to insist that the cultural myth is true. "It is as though, without our insistence that our outlook is correct," the philosopher Jonathan Lear writes concerning such insistence generally, “the outlook itself might collapse.”[22]

Lear’s book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* is about that collapse. It’s about how the central activities and meanings of a culture might stop making sense. It focuses on an extended study of a single case: the Crow, a Native American tribe who live on the northern plains. The Crow built their culture around hunting buffalo and “counting coups”—an activity that encompasses both feats of bravery in war and recitations of stories about those feats. Once white settlers killed off the buffalo and placed the Crow under the US government’s jurisdiction in the 1880s, the basis for Crow culture was gone. “After this nothing happened,” the Crow chief Plenty Coups told a white historian decades later.[23]

What happens when a culture ceases, but the people live on? How do they understand what they do? How do they make judgments about what to do, or what to aspire to? When the material reality that undergirds the immaterial reality of my culture disappears, Lear writes, “my problem is not simply that my way of life has come to an end. I no longer have the concepts with which to understand myself or my world. I understood the other [elements of culture] in terms of their roles, but there are no longer any such roles.”[24] Nothing happened after the buffalo disappeared, because the ground for “happening” was gone. It wasn’t just futile to count coups once the federal government outlawed war between plains tribes. It was nonsensical. There could no longer be any coups to count.

The end of work doesn’t just threaten livelihoods and people’s sense of self-worth. It isn’t just the loss of a good within the system of meaning. It’s the loss of the system itself. The new machine age doesn’t present us with the prospect of “mass unemployment,” in which jobs will merely be scarce and people will have to compete harder, or get more education, or be willing to move farther away or accept lower pay in order to secure one. Mass unemployment is legible within the culture of the work ethic. That people who have no hope of finding decent work are dying “deaths of despair” is evidence that the culture of the job is intact even where the economy isn’t.[25] The robot revolution will instead be one in which

there is no more employment or unemployment, in which the whole employed/unemployed dichotomy, the one John Smith relied on to get the Jamestown colonists to gather food and wood, doesn't exist. To the extent that our culture is organized around jobs, the mass deployment of artificially intelligent machines that can perform job functions will amount to a cultural collapse. All the meanings we associate with work will evaporate. Our culture will be at a loss to explain itself.

Will the idea that time is valuable make sense in a society without jobs, once people are no longer paid for their time? Will universal education make sense, once schools are no longer educating everyone for the work force? Will old age make sense as a well-earned rest after a lifetime of labor? How long will it take marital and child-rearing norms to respond to the reality that there is no such thing as a "breadwinner"? The end of work calls everything into question. We're going to need answers.

Recovering Older Virtues

Our work-centered culture hasn't collapsed yet. We have time now to get off the rickety scaffolding and build a new culture before disaster hits. If we do that, then the fully automated age won't be a disaster at all.

In Lear's telling, Plenty Coups offers a lesson in hope. Through radical acts of imagination and courage, he found the Crow people a way past cultural devastation. The Crow had to give up the warrior ethos, but Plenty Coups recovered other virtues from the Crow tradition. One of these was "the virtue of the chickadee"—the ability to learn from others' successes and failures.[26] The chickadee had historically been a minor figure in Crow thought, but it appeared to Plenty Coups in a vision when he was young, and the chief returned to that vision to recreate a system of meaning once "nothing happened." He relied on the virtue of the chickadee in negotiating with the United States, and the negotiations worked out comparatively well. The Crow reservation was diminished, but the tribe retained some of its traditional lands and ended up in a stronger position than its long-standing rivals. The Crow could legitimately claim that they were never defeated.[27]

It's hard to say in advance what a postwork American culture will look like. The hope Lear sees in the example of Plenty Coups is radical because "it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends our current ability to understand what it is."[28] A cultural breakdown is typically unimaginable from within a culture itself. And so far, we aren't doing much to imagine the cultural consequences of the end of work. But in a way, the poor condition of our cultural scaffolding is an advantage. The system that finds so much meaning in work already doesn't do what it purports to do. We just have to stop insisting that it does, and then we can begin to change.

Like the Crow, members of postindustrial American capitalist culture will need to repurpose older, half-forgotten virtues. We may have to shelve our volumes of Ben Franklin and Booker T. Washington and Sheryl Sandberg, and pick up those of people who've dissented from the work culture: Henry David Thoreau, Josef Pieper, Barbara Ehrenreich. There are plenty of dissenters living among us; ascetics, van dwellers, disabled artists, and slackers already understand their worth in terms other than work. Let's learn from them.

Maybe the collapse will never occur. Maybe we'll come up with new jobs after intelligent machines are capable of replicating everything we can do. Maybe the craft economy will grow in tandem with automated industries. Maybe we'll restructure public policy toward taxation and medical care, among other areas, to make work in the "gig economy" more sustainable. Maybe we'll be able to cling to the value we place on "a job well done." But even then, the effort to create a vision of the good life independent of work won't be wasted. We'll be able to understand ourselves as workers, but we'll also be able to make the good life more inclusive, encompassing people with disabilities and full-time caregivers, and identifying the value of education as the development of human potential for its own sake. We'll be able to give new value to leisure and idleness.

We don't need meaningful work. We just need meaning, wherever we might find it.

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